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“THIRD CHURCH” MISSION IN THE “FIRST WORLD”

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“The Third Church”¹ is a term used by Walbert Buhlmann in the 1970’s for the then emerging Churches of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, as over against the established Churches of the West and the East. Although people now prefer to speak of “Majority World” or “Two-Thirds World” in relation to “First World,” I have chosen the above title because the mission of the Third Church is spotlighting residues of the mentality of First World and Third World, and these demand examination.

How’s the Mission?

It can be said that Third Church mission has begun well. The majority of the agents have been well received; some have become deans, pastors, administrators and professors in seminaries and higher institutions of learning. Their presence in the First World has inspired greater interest in their backgrounds and led to increased visits to the Third Church on the part of First World Christians. Such visits are forging bonds of solidarity across the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans and leading to better mutual understanding. Members of the Third Church now serve in general and provincial administrations of missionary congregations and in their formation programs located in the First World. Some presidents and important officers of dicasteries of the Roman Curia are from the Third Church. These are important steps in the right direction, but the true point of arrival will be when such developments are no longer seen as newsworthy. As the entire Church integrates the fairly new experience of Third Church mission, crises of growth can only be expected. A missionary congregation was on the point of electing a Sri Lankan as Superior General when rules changed in mid-course and frustrated the election of the Sri Lankan. The Sri Lankan province of that order was not going to take this lying down; it decided to pursue independent identity and has remained so to-date.

What is the Mission?

Immigration is a global fact and immigrants in the First World need pastoral attention and services. So, a large part of the mission of the Third Church consists in helping the Churches of the First World cater to the needs of migrants.

There is also the issue of faith growing cold, especially in its institutional dimension. In most of Europe the attachment to

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the Church is loose and Sunday attendance very low. Mulemfo, who went to Sweden in 1996 on “mission in return,” had this to say:

Statistics show that only 5 percent of the overall population attend church every week ... Secularisation is seen also in more specific things that Swedes believe: Only fifteen percent believe in a personal God; twenty percent in the resurrection of the dead – about as many as believe in reincarnation and transmigration of souls.²

Leonidas Kalugila of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania was a pastor in Denmark from 1966. He noted that, though most people were baptized, very few were active and many people said that they did not believe in God. In one case an immigrant attended a Sunday service which was not held: the pastor told him that there was no service because no parishioner came.³

In the U.S. and Canada, secularization takes a different turn.

In the U.S. and Canada, secularization takes a different turn. The problem is not the coldness of faith but the lack of ordained ministers, both for the American-born and for immigrants of various languages and cultures who have arrived since 1965 when Congress widened the door for immigration. A 1999 CARA study found that 16% of priests in U.S. were foreign-born.⁴ Surveys of new ordinands found that in 2004 31% of them were foreign-born; in 2005 the figure was 27%.⁵ This year the Archdiocese of Chicago ordained 13 priests, only one of whom was native to Chicago and five of whom were East Africans being ordained for Chicago Archdiocese.

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Some dioceses, however, reject the option of inviting “foreign” ordained ministers. They reason that each local Church should be able to generate ministers from within as fruit of the Eucharistic assembly. Should a lack of ordained ministry occur, this should be an invitation to explore other models of Church and pastoral practice better adapted to the situation of the Church. Hoge and Okure⁶ outline other arguments gleaned from interviews. Language and culture barriers top the list. A different ecclesiology that tends towards the conservative is also mentioned. Often cited was discomfort with the high degree of lay involvement in ministry, especially by women. A complaint from Australia gives vent to the feeling that

These migrant priests also come with culturally filtered interpretations of Catholic teaching that do not always

*accord with Western readings ... [they] do not have a relevant cultural bank from which they can draw pastoral sensitivities.*⁷

To put things into perspective, it should be remembered that missionaries to the Third Church also came with their cultural baggage; it could not be otherwise. Many of them preached through interpreters all their stay on the mission. The people nevertheless received them graciously as guests and interacted meaningfully with them. Acculturation is a mutual process,⁸ of missionary and people. Mission is intercultural exchange, as the evolving theology and practice of mission shows.

Evolving Theology of Mission

Mission used to be a one-way street, from Europe and North America to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Many of those missionaries saw themselves and were seen as heroes whose mission was to “civilize and Christianize.” No one denied that the natives being missioned to had their own wisdom and venerable cultures, some even older than Christianity. However, they needed to be inducted into the culture of the colonial powers and this was also considered as *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the faith). Missionaries brought money and material from their home Churches to help build churches, schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Mission was done from an assumption of cultural and religious superiority.

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All that began to change in 1963 at the World Mission and Evangelism Conference in Mexico. This conference introduced the concept of “Mission in Six Continents.” Mission transmuted into a “mutual exchange of energies”⁹ in which all have something to give and something to receive.

The 1964 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, 13, asserted that

in virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church ... Between all the parts of the Church there remains a bond of close communion with respect to spiritual riches, apostolic workers, and temporal resources.

The 1965 Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*, 20, followed, exhorting that

It is fitting that the young Churches should participate as soon as possible in the universal missionary work of the

*Church. Let them send their own missionaries **to proclaim the gospel all over the world**, even though they themselves are suffering from a shortage of clergy.¹⁰[emphasis mine].*

No. 2 of the same document clinched it all when it said that

The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.

...mission is universal and intrinsic to each local Church...

So mission is universal and intrinsic to each local Church: all Churches must be ready to share and receive something of “that fountain of love” (*Ad gentes*, 2) flowing from the Trinity. Each Church must offer others what it has and gladly receive help and support from other Churches. Nothing in this exchange between sister Churches should create either slavish dependence or inferiority-superiority complexes, only love and solidarity in faith.

Third Church mission is done in humility.

What can Third Church Mission bring to the “Mutual Exchange of Energies”?

Third Church mission is done in humility. It is occasional that one is required to build monuments or establish institutions afresh, but this does not rob Third Church mission of contributions. In fact, except for the brief colonial period, the Church’s mission has always been in humility, the direct sharing of faith, and with the Cross as the only power behind it.

In an earlier reflection,¹¹ I outlined the following possible contributions of Third Church mission:

African solidarity, love for community, and respect for the aged as the most honored members of the family could be significant contributions. Family values can blossom only if people are willing to reorient their lives toward greater solidarity.

Further,

***Mmadu ka uba** (possessions cannot be compared with people, life first) ... The quality of life does not consist in having, but in harmony and concord among people and between them and the spirit world.*

The success of Pentecostal and Charismatic groups from the Third Church is showing that there is receptivity in the First World to Third Church values. For example, Stephen Gyermeh, a Ghanaian, started the Church of the Living God in Hyattsville, Maryland, in 1983 with 15 converts; the Church has now 1,500

members. The Nigerian-based Christ Apostolic Church already has 15 churches across the U.S.¹² These groups bring to mission their own way of being Christian, with emphasis on prayer and the Holy Spirit, communal and vibrant worship.

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It should be noted that liberation theology and basic Christian communities are gifts to the entire Church from Latin America; South African Christians led the way in raising the consciousness of Christians all over the world to the incompatibility of faith with apartheid and racism.

Third Church Mission and the Congregation

The Spiritan Congregation is on the verge of being caught up in the ferment. The recent *Spiritana Newsflash* (SpN 183, May 2, 2007) gave the figure of 944 candidates in initial formation, 816 of whom are from Africa, 49 from Latin America, 37 from Europe, 32 from the Indian Ocean and Asia, and 10 from North America. That means that the First World, the erstwhile base of the Congregation and home of Spiritan mission, counts only 5% (47) of the next generation of Spiritan missionaries. 95% of such mission will rest squarely on the shoulders of members from the Third Church.

Unless I am mistaken, the appointment of an experienced Nigerian Spiritan to work with youth in Knechtsteden in the early 1980's was the first instance of reverse Third Church Spiritan mission. The trend has continued. First appointments to the First World are already being made. Spiritans on first appointment from the Nigerian Province alone are now working in France, Holland, Ireland, TransCanada, and Puerto Rico. Casualties have been few, but even those few may need to be reexamined for possible lessons. In the present situation, the provinces of the First World face the choice of accepting new life from the younger provinces and foundations or they will with time slowly wind down. Here is an opportunity for the Congregation to actually live our motto, "*cor unum et anima una*" (one heart and one soul). And should this happen, a point may be reached in the not too distant future when the majority of members of First World provinces will be from the Third Church.

Issues to be Faced

The primary issue is that of a change of perspectives on mission, among Spiritans and those to whom they minister. Most people in the First World still do not accept that they can be receivers of mission. In their mind, missionaries go from the First World,

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“migrant priests” move from the Third Church and these are either refugees or suspected of looking for greener pastures like the immigrants (legal and illegal) who are receiving negative press in many nations of the West. Kalugila mentions how a fellow pastor continued arguing, even on T.V., that there was Danish Christianity which a foreigner could not understand or minister to, for “God would not play on black keys in Denmark as [God] could in Africa.”¹³ Before a Third Church missionary begins his mandate the entire community should join him in a mutual acculturation process. Expectations should be mutual as well as openness to receive. An interviewer put it succinctly:

*The priest may preach differently, teach differently, introduce new music, experiment with new programs, or portray a different spirituality.*¹⁴

Third Church Spiritan mission in the First World needs closer planning. What seems to be happening (obviously not everywhere) is that individual Spiritans are often sent to fill gaps in the service station. We need well-articulated and challenging missions, like vocation ministry, youth chaplaincy, and the defense and pastoral care of illegal immigrants, to give examples. People would have to be trained specifically for such ministries and commit to them for the long haul. Other groups are discovering fresh and fruitful fields of mission and evangelism in the First World and they challenge us to be more creative in designing the mission of Third Church Spiritans.

People designated should take the time it requires for language and culture training and should become members of the circumscription of ministry with all rights and duties. Third Church Spiritans sometimes feel (rightly or wrongly) that relationships are patronizing and less than mutual. International communities have become the buzz word, but how intercultural are they? A proverb has it that if the king visits, you give him a goat, and if you visit the king, you still give him a goat – reciprocity is not to be expected. The distinction of “province of origin” and “province of appointment” will have to be reviewed, in the sense that some of the matters now devolving on province of origin (further studies, retirement, pension, etc.) should accrue to the province of work. That way, every Spiritan is a full citizen of the Congregation where he is. It would be best if people were sent for further studies in the place of their future assignment so that the time for studies would also serve acculturation purposes, and these studies should be paid for by the province of their future mission. After all, the Third Church provinces and foundations

have borne the brunt of their formation for several years. Some older provinces have begun handing over their Spiritan works to the laity; that is good as these laity commit to preserve the Spiritan charism. But a gradual handing over to fellow Spiritans is even better. In the 1980's the foundations were formally established as a channel of love and solidarity within the Congregation. These foundations have grown of age and are in a position to make a return, in solidarity and mutual respect.

What I saw recently at a wedding in a parish in Barrington, Illinois, filled me with hope for the future of Third Church mission. Members of the parish sponsored the wedding as they have some projects in Zaire, the home of the groom; he found acceptance in bringing who he was to his pastoral work in the parish. On a mission appeal in St. Paul Minnesota I found the pastor away in Ghana with a team of parishioners visiting a twin parish whose church they had built. The exchanges were mutual and concerned the cultural and religious as well as the financial.

Something exciting is happening in mission today.

Something exciting is happening in mission today. The mission of the Third Church in the First World is laying the foundations for that mutual respect and solidarity that will change the face of the present world order.¹⁵

Footnotes

¹ *The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977).

² Mukanda M. Mulemfo. "An African Missionary in Return. Reflections on a Visit to Sweden." *Missionalia* 25/1 (April 1997) 100-123, 106. The citation is from Carl Brakenheim. "Christianity and Swedish Culture: A Case Study." *International Review of Mission* 84 (Jan-April 1995) 91-105, 92.

³ Rev. Leonidas Kalugila. "Experiences of an African Missionary in Western Countries." Lutheran World Federation, Department of Church Cooperation. *All Africa Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology and Strategy for Mission* (Liberia, Monrovia, 1980) 51.

⁴ Froehle, Bryan T., et al. *Priest Personnel Profile and Diocesan Pastoral Strategies*. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (Washington DC: Georgetown University, 1999.)

⁵ Dean R. Hoge and Aniedi Okure, *International Priests in America: Challenges and Opportunities* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006) 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-68.

⁷ Jane Anderson. "Migrant Priests?" at <http://www.sedos.org/english/anderson.htm> created on 12-31-2004, accessed 7-27-2007.

⁸ Fact stressed by Seung Ai Yabg, "Commentary," Hoge and Okure. *International Priests in America*, 132.

⁹ James Chukwuma Okoye. "Mutual Exchange of Energies: Mission in Cross-Cultural Perspective. An African Point of View," *Missiology* 25/4 (October 1997) 467-497

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¹⁰ Translation from Walter Abbot and Joseph Gallagher, eds. *Documents of Vatican II* (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966).

¹¹ Okoye, "Mutual Exchange of Energies," 474.

¹² *Christian Century* 114.23, page 719, at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli>, accessed 8/30/2007.

¹³ Rev. Leonidas Kalugila. "Experiences of an African Missionary in Western Countries." Lutheran World Federation, Department of Church Cooperation. *All Africa Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology and Strategy for Mission* (Liberia, Monrovia, 1980) 50.

¹⁴ Hoge and Okure. *International Priests in America*, 47.

¹⁵ I thank Very Rev. Father Gabriel Ezewudo, Professor Paulinus Odozor, and Rev. Father Eze Venantius, who read the first draft of this paper and proffered comments. The shortcomings, of course, remain mine.